

How the battle of Claremont Road changed the world: ‘The whole of alternative London turned up’

Steve Rose

Walking through Leyton, in east London, you could easily miss Claremont Road. It is hardly a road at all, but a stubby little side street between terrace houses that ends abruptly in a brick wall. But when it comes to the history of direct action, this could be one of the most significant sites in England. Thirty years ago, in November 1994, the scene here was very different: 700 police officers and bailiffs in riot gear marched into a significantly larger Claremont Road and waged battle against about 500 activists, who were dug in – some of them literally – against efforts to evict them.

The activists occupied rooftop towers, treehouses, underground bunkers and even secret tunnels. It took three days to get them all out. In retrospect, the “Battle of Claremont Road”, as it came to be known, was an almost unbelievable event. “I talk about the three C’s that underpin this type of activism: creativity, courage and cheek,” says campaigner Camilla Berens, who was there. “It set the template for the next 20 or 30 years of how to do responsible disruption.”

The reason for the battle, and the reason Claremont Road is now so short, lies behind that brick wall at its end: what is now the six-lane A12, also known as the M11 link road. The road had been planned since the 1960s, to connect east London to the north-east, but nothing happened for decades. In the interim, many of the condemned homes were vacated by residents and reoccupied by squatters and artists. (As a student, I squatted on Claremont Road for three years. I left in summer 1993.)



📷 Cars and shopping trolleys full of concrete were used to block the road. Photograph: Julia Guest

By the 1990s, the Conservative government was determined to make good on Margaret Thatcher’s promise to carry out “[the biggest road-building programme since the Romans](#)”. Resistance from locals and environmental groups was growing, though, against schemes such as the M3 extension at [Twyford Down](#) in Hampshire (which went ahead), and the proposed east London river crossing through Oxleas Wood, in south-east London (which did not).

“The M11 link road was effectively the Cinderella of the three,” says veteran cycling campaigner Roger Geffen. Unlike Twyford Down and Oxleas Wood, the M11 scheme went through a poor urban neighbourhood, rather than an area of natural beauty, “but in a way, that’s what made it interesting,” he

says. It was destroying the environment by uprooting trees and prioritising cars, but it was also destroying a community. This was the era of the [Criminal Justice Act](#), targeting illegal raves, squatters and Travellers, which also passed in November 1994. The [poll tax riots of 1990](#) had been another landmark. The Claremont Road protests were a “a joined-up mix of social and environmental motivations”.

At the time, Geffen had just moved to London. “I didn’t have a green brain cell in my head,” he says, but he had just taken up cycling. Weaving through the traffic-clogged streets, he says, he realised: “What I was doing wasn’t crazy. I was overtaking a lot of people in little boxes, and that was far crazier than what I was doing.” He joined the London Cycling Campaign, which led him into anti-car activism.

By the early 90s, the Department for Transport had begun repossessing and demolishing houses along the route of the M11 link road. In 1994, Claremont Road was the last street standing. “We realised that we needed to make a big focus of it,” says Geffen.



📷 Activists built webbing up on the rooftops to evade police. Photograph: Julia Guest

“One of the first things we did was to barricade it and set up street furniture,” says John Drury, then a PhD student studying collective action. The street became something of a countercultural tourist attraction, with colourful murals and outdoor sculptures made of junk and a public cafe. Doug (not his real name), then an unemployed activist, says: “There was a real buzz, and it had a lot of energy, and everyone was really friendly, so I just started sticking around.”

As the inevitable showdown approached, preparations became more rushed. “We had to just throw everything at it,” says Geffen. Some protesters built wooden observation towers on top of their houses. “So we thought, OK, what happens if we build an absolutely huge tower?” This became “Dolly”, a scaffolding structure 30 metres (100ft) high, rising out of the rooftops. It was named after Dolly Watson, a 92-year-old former actor who had lived on Claremont Road her entire life, and was among the last of the residents to leave. She once told a reporter: “They’re not dirty hippy squatters, they’re the grandchildren I never had.”

Other ad-hoc battlements appeared: treehouses, connected to the houses across the street by webs of netting and walkways; roadblocks made out of cars and shopping trolleys filled with concrete. Some activists built underground bunkers in which to seal themselves – “very elaborate womb-like structures that involved lots of layers of mattresses, foam, metal and furniture,” Doug recalls. The idea was that whatever tool the police or bailiffs tried to use to get them out “would get gummed up”. The upper floors of several houses beneath the tower were knocked together to create a “rat run”, and the stairs up to them were removed, to make it harder for the police to reach the protesters.

Volunteers had been monitoring police compounds for signs of activity. The callout came on 27 November. “‘It’s the one, it’s the big eviction. Claremont is going to be taken,’” recalls Berens, a journalist who reported on the events for the Guardian. “I think the whole of alternative London turned up. There was a massive party the night before.”

The next morning, 28 November, an estimated 500 protesters were ready, remembers Neil Goodwin, a film-maker who [recorded much of the siege](#): “The rooftops were packed; every bunker, every treehouse, on the nets, the landings, the walkways, up the tower – everyone was in situ.”

“The police turned up in the early afternoon,” recalls Mark Green (not his real name), another participant. “There were hundreds of them and they swarmed into the street in stormtrooper gear with batons raised. They were expecting a full-on riot. Instead they just found a bunch of hippies and local residents sitting around.” A sound system on the tower cranked up the Prodigy album *Music for the Jilted Generation*.



📷 A 30ft tower was also built, with a sound system from which music blared out.

Photograph: Julia Guest

Things didn’t go as planned for the police. “They thought they were going to start by tackling the houses, and then they realised people had locked on to the road itself,” says Julia Guest, then an aspiring photographer. Activists had drilled holes into the asphalt, into which they had sunk lock-on bolts, which were covered over with sheets of metal with holes in them. The activists “lay down with their arms through the holes and locked their wrists on with handcuffs.”

The police and bailiffs brought in mechanical diggers, cherrypickers, ladders, hammers and crowbars; and every occupant made themselves as difficult as possible to remove. “I was in the loft at number 42, which I’d covered in corrugated iron and filled with tyres,” says Goodwin. “They had to prise us open, like a sardine tin.”

When the bailiffs eventually broke through that evening, Goodwin attached himself to part of the scaffolding tower with a bicycle D-lock, the keys of which he had chucked into a pile of tyres. “The bailiff pokes his head in, shines his torch around and goes: ‘OK, we’ll do this tomorrow.’ So they left, and I’m like: ‘I’m gonna be sitting here all night.’ So I said to people: ‘Could you see if you can find some D-lock keys?’” Luckily, they were just teetering over the edge of a gap in the floorboards.

Everyone remembers being cold and hungry, especially the first night. Few people had warm clothes, let alone sleeping bags. “After it got dark, someone led me down through a loft to warm up a bit,” says Green. “We then went through a hole in a wall and exited through a wardrobe, which was surreal, into a room where people were watching themselves on the news on an old black-and-white portable TV.”

By the second day, about half the protesters had been evicted. But, says Geffen: “The police were puzzled that people who they thought they’d evicted kept reappearing. Eventually, they got a metal detector out.”

They discovered the activists had built a tunnel out of oil drums, running underneath the back gardens and into one of the houses on the next road. Supplies and people had been going back and forth the whole time. “When they found the tunnel, everyone on the tower and all the roofs just laughed at them.”

The longer the protest went on, “the more brutal the police and bailiffs became”, says Berens. Green says he saw people shoved, grabbed and falling from heights (though no one was seriously injured). “It definitely felt like there was a political element to it.”

The protesters “had a very strong commitment to non-violence”, says Geffen. “We needed to be acting in accordance with the values that we wanted to speak for. If we’re talking about environmental sustainability and sharing this Earth, and working in community, then violence doesn’t form part of that.”

By the end of the second day, there was only one protester left: Doug. “I kept moving,” he says. “If you live on a scaffolding tower for a few days, you can get quite good at swinging around. And they didn’t really want to chase me around in a game of cat and mouse.” Doug’s persistence extended the protest by another full day. The police even brought in a “hostage negotiator” to try to coax him down. “He pretended he was my dad, and was just concerned for my welfare.” Doug was not swayed. “I grabbed some rope, a saw and a few planks of wood, and I used them to make myself what was basically a coffin, which I slept in.” The police finally got to him the next morning.



📷A sign referring to Dolly Watson, a 92-year-old former actor who had lived on Claremont Road all her life. Photograph: Julia Guest

In the end, the police spent more than £1m evicting the protesters. The M11 link road still got built, of course. Nobody believed the campaign would stop it. “But what it did do,” says Drury, “was it turned the roads programme into a political thing. So, we won the moral argument, even if we didn’t win that battle.”

When Labour came into power in 1997, it cut the major road schemes inherited from the Tories from 150 to 37, and pledged to focus on public transport. It felt like a victory for the anti-car campaigners, but it did not last. By 2000, New Labour was [committing at least £30bn to building and improving roads](#), and forecasting that another 2,500 miles of road would need to be built.

Several of the Claremont Road activists went straight on to form [Reclaim the Streets](#) in 1995, which performed guerrilla anti-car actions – such as blocking off public roads to hold impromptu “street parties” – across the UK and worldwide. It also paved the way for subsequent campaigns such as Plane Stupid, the [Climate Action Camps](#), [Extinction Rebellion](#) and [Just Stop Oil](#).

The protest changed the lives of many of those who took part. “That was the day that I crossed the line,” says Berens. “Before that, I was a journalist looking in and reporting on it, but because it was such an impressive campaign, and the people were so amazing, I became a committed activist.”

“It impacted me quite profoundly,” says Guest. She became a documentary film-maker focusing on human rights in Israel, Palestine and Iraq.

Paul Morozzo, one of the key organisers alongside Geffen, is now a campaigner at Greenpeace. Drury is a professor of social psychology at Sussex university. Doug is a lawyer dealing with civic issues.

Green went on to design the famous [Extinction Symbol](#), as used by Extinction Rebellion. He is less nostalgic about the event: “I found the overall experience cold, dirty and depressing,” he says. He doesn’t like to describe it as a “battle”. “That suggests an exchange of violence, whereas it was just a group of people passively occupying an area, with the only violence coming from the police.”

But like a battle, the event took its toll. As well as committed activists, the area and the protest attracted many people with drug and mental health problems, not to mention locals who were either uprooted or forced to live on the edge of a six-lane road. “I naively hoped it would be a spark for a wider and longer-lasting societal change,” says Green. “Instead, things have just got much worse since then than we could ever have imagined.”

Geffen received an MBE for services to cycling in 2015, and now heads [Low Traffic Future](#). “What I’m now doing is still basically the same cause,” he says. “In the 1990s, transport, roads, cars were the central issue for the environmental movement, then we lost a lot of that momentum. Environmental campaigners have gone on to do some great things on energy ... but transport is now the biggest-emitting sector of the UK economy, as well as being problematic in terms of air pollution, road safety, children’s ability to play in the streets and all the waste products of car culture.” He thinks the movement needs to focus again on transport.

Another action like Claremont Road is unthinkable now, given how far legislation has tightened against protest, public disorder and squatting.

“It breaks my heart,” says Guest, “because actions like that created a generation of people that have become acutely aware, and prepared to act on strong beliefs. That is, after all, the only way that anything that’s unjust gets changed. And if people are prevented from being able to freely connect with that sort of experience, then what sort of world is going to come next?”